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The International Sunday-School Lessons.¹

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I.

AUGUST 6. THE NEW HEART, EZEK. 36:25-36.

1. *The prophet Ezekiel.*—The most interesting figure of the earlier period of the exile is Ezekiel. Descended from a priestly family, and probably for some years in actual service in the temple at Jerusalem, he had been carried away at the time of the first deportation in 597 B. C., and spent the remainder of his life among the scattered exiles in Babylonia. His home was with one of the colonies at Tel Abib, "corn-hill," on the Chebar, probably one of the canals of the province. In 592 B. C., five years later, he received his prophetic call, and from that time discharged toward his exiled countrymen the duties of a pastor, or "shepherd," to use his favorite word. For this task he was peculiarly fitted. To the priestly experience of his earlier life he added the temper and enthusiasm of a prophet. To such an extent are the characteristics of Jeremiah's teaching embodied in his utterances that one is tempted to believe he must have listened in Jerusalem to the preaching of that notable prophet, the embodiment of the deuteronomic covenant, and the great reformation under Josiah. At all events, Ezekiel performed for the expatriated Jews in Babylonia the service which his older contemporary rendered the remnant in Judea, before he was carried away by the refugees to Egypt.

2. *The book of Ezekiel.*—With a continuity and order which characterize none of the other long prophetic books, this volume preserves the record of Ezekiel's pastoral activity for a quarter of a century. The first section (chaps. 1-24) includes the utterances of the period preceding the fall of Jerusalem. After the first deportation, in which King Jehoiachin was removed to Babylon, and in which Ezekiel himself was exiled, it was the well-nigh universal expectation, both of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and of the Jews who had been deported, that all the banished would soon be restored. Against this false hope both Jeremiah and Ezekiel protested, the one in Jerusalem, the other in Babylonia. It was the message of both prophets that still further chastisements must fall on the nation for its sin. Such is the tone of

¹ The chief value of these studies will be found in a careful use of the questions which constitute the last division in each case. The other material is valuable only in so far as it is an aid to their use.

these chapters, and, as may be imagined, their message was received with incredulity and disfavor, even approaching personal violence. From the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. till the news reached the prophet (33:21), he seems to have kept silence on the condition and prospects of the people, and to have used the time in the arrangement of the oracles against the nations (chaps. 25-32). After the fugitive from Jerusalem announced its fall, Ezekiel devoted himself to the task of restoring confidence and kindling hope in the hearts of his countrymen, to whom the dreadful news had come as a shock almost too great to bear. Chaps. 33-39 contain assurances of the redemption and restitution of the people to their ancestral home, and in chaps. 40-48 there is presented the vision of an ideal theocracy with its reconstructed temple.

3. *Defiance and promise.*—In the third section of the book (chaps. 23-39) are contained certain pictures of the restored nationality. The first of these (chap. 34) contrasts the former unworthy rulers ("shepherds") of the people with the future ideal monarchy. The second (chaps. 35, 36) declares that Israel's hereditary enemies shall be punished, and the sacred land shall be fertile, purified, and an eternal possession for Israel. The third (chap. 37) describes the reawakening of the nation to life. From the second of these pictures the present study is taken. The Edomites were the most savage and relentless of the enemies of Judah in the day of its distress. The short prophecy of Obadiah describes the wild joy with which these neighbors beheld the downfall of the city. Among the mournful strains of the exiles in Babylon is heard the cry for vengeance upon Edom (Ps. 137:7), and even with the hope of a Messianic king is mingled the glad vision of his arrival drenched in the blood of Edom (Isa. 63:1-6). It is the assurance of such a retribution upon these foes that Ezekiel brings to the exiles to persuade them that there is yet a future for their race (chap. 35). The Edomites had claimed the holy land as their possession (35:10; 36:2). But the message of God is sent to the land that it shall be swept clean of the oppressor, it shall be given unusual richness and fertility, and shall be once more inhabited as in the olden days (36:1-15). It was not because Jehovah was unable to protect his land, but because the people themselves had defiled it with their evil deeds and idolatries, that he scattered them among foreign nations as exiles (36:16-19). But even in other lands they still represented Jehovah in some sense, and therefore for his own sake—not because they have merited his love, but because his honor and dignity demand it—he will restore them.

4. *Cleansing and renewal.*—The people in Babylonia were living among heathen influences. They were therefore looked upon as having contracted defilement. A special purgation must be made before they could be fit to dwell in the purified land. Jehovah, says the prophet, will sprinkle them with cleansing water. By this figure reference is made to the custom of sprinkling with a purifying water

those who contracted unusual defilement (see Numb. 19 : 9-18). Their impurities included moral shortcomings and idolatry. But the root of their trouble had been their stubbornness. They had obstinately refused to listen to the divine warnings presented by the prophets. What they most needed was a new heart and spirit, the former denoting disposition, nature; the latter, purpose, will. The stone which they had in place of a heart should be removed, and a new nature and purpose should be given them. In such a renewed nature the divine Spirit could dwell, and the result would be obedience. Restoration to the land and to the old relationship with God follow as promises. The old sins no longer corrupt, and their consequences cease. Famine, which so often followed disobedience, is no longer to be feared, either as a visitation or a cause of taunting by their neighbors. Remembrance of the disgraceful past shall bring the keenest sense of self-reproach, and utter loathing of the old unholy life. All this Jehovah will do for his own sake. They have not merited it, but his majesty demands it. He satisfies himself in saving them. The empty cities, left desolate by the Babylonian armies, shall be rebuilt and peopled. The land that was so swept by destruction that passers-by were astonished shall equally surprise the beholders by its beauty. The nations which survive the divine judgments shall recognize the work of God in the restoration of Zion.

5. *Questions.*—(1) In what country and period did Ezekiel live? (2) What was his mission? (3) Of what approaching calamity did he warn the exiles in the earlier years of his ministry? (4) After the fall of Jerusalem how did he seek to encourage them? (5) Against what nation did he utter threats of punishment? (6) What did he promise regarding the land of Judah (36: 1-15)? (7) Whose fault was it that the people had been scattered (36: 16-19)? (8) What is the meaning of the figure of sprinkling clean water upon them? What Levitical practice is referred to? (9) From what two kinds of sin did they need cleansing? (10) What is the difference between "heart" and "spirit" in vs. 26? (11) Is it possible for God to bestow a new heart without coöperation on the part of the one who receives it? (12) Which is the greater blessing, to be saved from sin or from the consequences of sin? (13) Can the Spirit of God dwell in any other than a transformed nature (vs. 27)? (14) What six temporal blessings were promised Israel (vss. 29, 30, 33-36)? (15) What mental condition should follow (vs. 31)? (16) What reason is given for this restoration and renovation (vss. 22, 32)? (17) Were these promises literally fulfilled? If not, have they been spiritually fulfilled? Which is the greater fulfilment? (18) On what condition may one receive a new heart today? (19) What relation does this teaching regarding the new heart bear to the New Testament doctrine of regeneration?

II.

AUGUST 13. EZEKIEL'S GREAT VISION, EZEK. 37:1-14.

1. *The prophet's task.*—The spiritual interests of the world were involved in the task to which Ezekiel set himself, that of keeping alive in the hearts of his countrymen the hope of restoration to Judah, and a renewed national life. He was well aware that the best elements of the Jewish race had been brought to Babylon, and that in comparison the remnant left in Palestine was of small account. In the despair that followed the news of Jerusalem's fall the people gave up the expectation of return and settled themselves to the various careers which the East offered them. Presently success began to crown these efforts, and gradually the remembrance of Zion faded from their minds. It was this danger which the prophets endeavored to meet by the assurance that Israel's mission was not yet achieved, and that it could be accomplished only in Judah. If such voices had been silenced, it is difficult to see how the world's spiritual hopes could have been realized. The nation dead in its exile must be brought to life again. This is the promise contained in the present study.

2. *The nation's revival.*—It is not difficult to understand the frame of mind of the most thoughtful among the Jews in Babylon. There was apparently no hope that they could go back to Jerusalem. The policy of Assyrian and Babylonian kings had not been such as to encourage expectations of that character. Even if they should go back, there was nothing left in Judah to make it desirable as a home. The national life was dead. Dry, lifeless bones alone remained. It is by the figure of such a vision that the prophet makes his appeal once more to these discouraged Jews, lapsing rapidly into the still more dangerous condition of contentment with life in the East. The vision was that of a plain or valley covered with human bones. They were not those of the recently slain, but of those long dead. They were white and bleached. In this prophetic ecstasy the divine voice asked if there was hope that these bones could live. There was no indication that they could, yet the question implied at least a possibility, and the prophet answered: "Thou knowest." Then came the command to prophesy that they should again live. It must be recalled that "prophesy" carries the meaning "preach" as well as "predict." It was by the prophet's task of preaching that the new life was to come. As Ezekiel fulfilled the command of the divine voice, there was a shock, a sound of rushing fragments, and bone joined itself to bone, while flesh covered them once more. Still there was no life in these bodies. Again the divine voice bade him prophesy to the wind. Here the meaning of the word is clearly exhortation or entreaty, an important element in prophesy. The double meaning of "wind" and "spirit" is also apparent. At his word life came to the inanimate multitude, and they stood up, a great host. This vision was the prophetic reply to the despairing lament of the people. Once more the figure changes,

and now it is promised that even those in their graves shall rise and return to Judah. Such wonders should indeed prove the power of God manifested in their national life. It is clear that throughout this section, both in the reference to the refreshing and animating of the dry bones and to the opening of the graves and the emergence of the dead, the thought moves wholly in the region of national restoration and not of individual resurrection. The prophet has no expectation that those Israelites who are dead will be revived to go back to Zion, but that the nation as such, in the persons of those living or their children, will repossess the ancient land. Both figures are applicable to individual resurrection as taught later in Jewish circles, but clearly the prophet has only a national revival in mind.

3. *Questions.*—(1) What was the feeling of the people regarding the future of the nation? (2) How did this affect the prospects of the true religion? (3) To what task did Ezekiel set himself? (4) What did the people say of themselves as a nation (vs. 11)? (5) How did the prophet endeavor to answer this feeling? (6) Note the prophetic ecstasy implied in the expression, "The hand of the Lord was upon me" (vs. 1). (7) What did Ezekiel see in the valley? What was the condition of the bones? What was the application of this fact to the nation? (8) How did the prophet regard the prospects of life for these bones? Would a dweller in Babylon have regarded Israel's future as equally hopeless? What is the application of this to the life of those who live in sin today? (9) What is the double meaning of "prophesy" (vs. 4)? Which of these meanings had the more to do with Ezekiel's work of securing a national regeneration? (10) What was the result of this "prophesying" (vs. 7)? (11) What was the significance of the "breath" or "spirit" coming upon them? (12) What is the meaning of "the whole house of Israel" (vs. 11)? (13) Is there any condition so hopeless but that there may be rescue? (14) How is the figure changed in vs. 12? (15) Had the prophet in mind individual resurrection, or national restoration? (16) In what manner do nations achieve resurrection? (17) Does the hope of personal immortality appear in the Old Testament? (18) In whose teaching does it come to full expression?

III.

AUGUST 20. THE RIVER OF SALVATION, EZEK. 47:1-12.

1. *The ideal sanctuary.*—The fourth section of the book of Ezekiel is devoted to a description of the temple which was to be erected in Jerusalem on the return of the people from Babylonia, and an outline of its ministries, together with the relations which the renewed state was

to sustain to it. There was a twofold purpose in this ideal picture. The object of the prophet, ever since the fateful day when the sad news of the fall of Jerusalem was received, had been to fortify the people against their growing indifference to the claims of the national faith by assurances of return to Judah and the reconstruction of the ruined state. Perhaps nothing was calculated to serve this purpose of encouragement better than the actual draft of the new temple. The description of the building and its ministries, sent forth by the prophet in the form of tracts among the people, would serve to excite interest in the future of Judah, and in some measure to cheer the despondent with the hope of a speedy change for the better. The second purpose of the prophet was to prepare for a more advanced type of ritual than had prevailed in the old temple, with a new insistence upon the holiness of the place and of the nation. In this manner Ezekiel served as a link in the development from the deuteronomic law of Josiah's day to the more elaborate priest code of post-exilic times. After picturing the temple itself with its various courts (chaps. 40-43), and the ordinances of the sanctuary (chaps. 44-46), the prophet describes the stream that issued from the holy house to freshen the land, whose limits are recorded (chap. 47), and, lastly, assigns cantonments to the various tribes in the ideal nation, now represented as reunited and complete (chap. 48). It is the third of these themes, the holy river, with which the present study concerns itself.

2. *The river of healing.*—The prophet, conducted by his divine guide, is brought from his survey of the various parts of the temple of his vision to the principal gate or door, which, of course, looked eastward. He saw that from the right side of the threshold waters issued from beneath the house, and flowed on to the east, past the great altar in the forecourt. The great gate being shut (44 : 2 ; 46 : 1), the prophet was conducted through the northern gate to the court, and then brought to the outside of the same eastern gate within which he had stood. Here again he saw the flowing stream, and, following its course for a distance of five hundred yards, according to the measure in the hand of the guide, the two passed through the stream, and found it ankle-deep. At the limit of a thousand yards the water came to the knees. After descending the stream another five hundred yards they crossed it and found it was waist-deep, and at the distance of two thousand yards from the gate the stream had become a river, to be crossed only by swimming. Thus, without apparent tributaries, the wonderful stream increased continuously its volume. On closer inspection of the banks the prophet noticed that there were numbers of trees on either side which, as he later understood from his companion (vs. 12), bore throughout the whole year fruit which was good for food, and its leaves of unfading beauty were for healing (*cf.* Rev. 22 : 2). This stream flowed on through the sterile region east of Jerusalem, refreshing the land through which it took its way, till at last it poured itself into the Dead Sea, whose salt, death-dealing waters were thereby freshened and made habitable. Fish,

which had never been known in those salt depths, were so plentiful that the whole sea-side was devoted to the fishing industry. Salt still remained in beds for the use of the people, but the whole region was transformed by the healing stream.

3. *Questions*.—(1) What two purposes had the prophet in recording his vision of the new temple? (2) From what part of the building did the waters emerge? (3) How did the prophet get outside the eastern gate? (4) Who was with him? (5) As they followed the stream, how was the measure of the distance taken? (6) How did the waters increase in depth and volume? Were there tributaries? (7) What were on the banks? What two qualities did the leaves possess? What three particulars regarding the fruit are mentioned? Whence did the leaves obtain their qualities? (8) In which direction did the river flow? Through what region? Into what sea? (9) What was the effect of the river upon the land through which it passed? Upon the sea? (10) What change occurred in the sea? (11) What new industry grew along its shore? (12) Could salt still be secured? (13) What was the cause of these marvelous qualities in the river (vs. 12)? (14) Did the prophet believe that such a stream would ever actually issue from the new temple? Did such an event ever transpire? (15) If it was a figure, what was its meaning? (16) Did helpful influences go out from the restored sanctuary at Jerusalem? (17) How is Christianity itself related to that Jewish temple? (18) Applying the figure of the stream to Christianity, what applications can be made of the figure? (19) Applying it to the individual Christian as the temple of God, what are its further meanings?

IV.

AUGUST 27. RETURNING FROM CAPTIVITY, EZRA I: I-11.

1. *The fall of Babylon*.—The end of the formal period of Judah's exile arrived in 538 B. C., when Cyrus, who had been hovering on the northeastern frontier, as discerned by those who, like the great prophets of the exile, watched the political situation, came at last to Babylon itself, which was given up to the Persians with little resistance. The policy of the new king was radically different from that of his predecessors. He saw the value of cultivating the friendship of the various nations scattered through his dominions, and among these the Jews colonized in Babylon had their place. Cyrus was not slow to perceive the importance of Judah as a frontier against the growing encroachments of Egypt, and the Jews living near Babylon suggested to him a method of securing the friendship of their whole nation by restoring their ancient capital, Jerusalem, and thus affording himself a barrier for the

protection of his western provinces. It is not probable that Cyrus was influenced to any extent by particular friendship for the Jews, nor that he was especially interested in their religion. There were points of contact between that religion and his own which may not have escaped his attention. However, his usual custom seems to have been that of claiming the friendship of the gods of the various nations over which he ruled, and of paying such honors to them as secured the good will of their worshipers. His inscriptions state that he restored the dismantled temples and returned the idols which had been carried away from their homes by the Babylonians. As the Jews had no idols, the vessels taken from the temple by Nebuchadrezzar formed a sufficiently satisfactory substitute, and thus Cyrus followed his usual policy of conciliation, not only by permitting those of the Jews who were so minded to return to their native land, but by actually assisting them, and placing in charge of a suitable governor chosen from their own number the objects of value belonging to the sanctuary.

2. *The records of the return.*—The books of Ezra and Nehemiah form the appropriate continuation of the records contained in Chronicles. It is quite apparent from a comparison of the last verses of 2 Chronicles with the opening verses of Ezra that the two were originally connected as one narrative, which was broken asunder in the middle of a sentence, and a portion of which has been recopied to form the opening sentences of Ezra. These documents, dating from a period considerably later than the events here chronicled, form the only literary memorials of the period, save those which come to us from the activity of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and other scattered materials of the Old Testament. They do not constitute a continuous narrative, and it is probable that some rearrangement of the sections is necessary in order to arrive at the facts. But their value, as throwing light upon the whole period from the close of the exile to a date somewhat late in the post-exilic time, is undisputed. They include documents coming from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and certain royal decrees which have probably been freely worked over in the spirit of enthusiastic Judaism.

3. *The character of the return.*—The present study sets forth the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (25:11, 12; 29:10) in the proclamation made by the new king Cyrus in favor of the Jewish people in his dominions. In this decree, which is presented here in the words of a Jewish writer who is anxious to show Cyrus' interest in Jehovah and Jerusalem, rather than its original form, the permission is granted that any of the exiles who desire to return may depart to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. It includes also the provision that those who prefer to remain in Babylon shall assist the emigrants with money and methods of transportation. It was undoubtedly the expectation of the prophets who lived during the exile and held forth the glowing promises of divine favor to the nation, that a large proportion of their countrymen would seize the opportunity of going back to Jerusalem as soon as it was presented. It is clear from a study of our documents

that it was equally the impression of later years that this privilege granted by the Persian king had been eagerly seized by the exiles, and that a large body of them did actually return soon after 538 B. C. The testimony of Haggai and Zechariah to the condition of facts in 520 B. C., however, makes it reasonably certain that a very small number availed themselves of this privilege, and that the beginnings of that series of emigrations which continued for many years were exceedingly meager. However, it may be affirmed with confidence that a body of pilgrims was actually gathered under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who was probably related to the royal house of Judah, and that to him were committed the sacred vessels, together with such gifts as the wealthier Jews in Babylon were willing to send to their impoverished countrymen in Judah. It was not a large beginning, but it was a beginning. The hopes of the prophets had not been realized in their fulness, but there was at least the probability, since the way was opened for the return, that others in increasing numbers would avail themselves of the privilege, and that Jerusalem might ultimately hope for a revival of its ancient life.

4. *Questions.*—(1) Whose conquest of Babylon changed the political condition of the world in 538 B. C.? (2) Who had predicted the seventy years of captivity? (3) To whose agency is the interest of Cyrus in the Jews ascribed (v. 1)? (4) What were the motives which would incline him to secure their good will? (5) What was the attitude of Cyrus toward the various religions of his subjects? Was his treatment of the Jews exceptional? (6) What was the particular purpose for which the return of the people was permitted (vs. 3)? (7) What were those who remained in Babylon to do for those who needed assistance for the journey? (8) What were all exhorted to send to Jerusalem (vs. 4)? (9) What hints are given in vs. 5 of the organization of the people in Babylon? (10) By what means had God stirred the spirit of some of the people on the subject (vs. 5)? (11) Does the language of vs. 6 indicate a partial or a general interest in the enterprise? (12) What valuable addition did the king make to the treasure which the caravan took? (13) Who was the leader? (14) Why was it important that there should be a return from Babylon? (15) What great spiritual enterprise would have been defeated if there had been no revival of Israel's life? (16) Was Cyrus conscious of the assistance he rendered the divine plans? (17) Are the great movements of history certainly guided by the hand of God? (18) What is the significance of such a faith as an aid to confidence in the outcome of events? (19) How does such a faith affect the individual, as to his responsibility?